
GAUDÍ & MACKINTOSH

The events organised throughout 2002 for the International Gaudí Year commemorating the birth of this great and gifted architect in Reus (Province of Tarragona) have served to consolidate him world-wide as one of the great creators of all time, a universal artist comparable in his genius to Malaga-born Picasso. In Barcelona there have been fourteen exhibitions in his honour running simultaneously.

Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (1852-1926) and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) never met, although they died on dates only two years apart. And that is not the only thing the two architects have in common. Both are

inseparable from the two cities with which they are habitually associated. To say Antoni Gaudí is to say Barcelona, in the same way that Glasgow is the city of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Both designed and constructed their buildings in the European Modernist ambit taking as their point of departure the Romantic ideal of the total work of art, the *gesamtkunstwerk*. But their respective works go beyond this artistic tendency. They mark the close of the development of 19th century architecture but are yet revolutionary in their anticipation of the abstract plastic sculptural and pictorial forms that characterise the early 20th century and the *avant-garde*.

In Gaudí's case, abstract language is especially evident in the chromatic and sculptural elements in his buildings, comparable to the work of Henry Moore. In Mackintosh's case, it is the utilisation of the line which leads on to formal abstraction. For this reason, despite the fact that from the plastic point of view Gaudí and Mackintosh coincided in their tendency to the abstract, they were radically different in the means they used. While Gaudí pursues a sculptural vision of the building, Mackintosh assigns a fundamental role to drawing as an artistic medium which leads to abstraction.

Gaudí's interest in sculpture and spatial comprehension in three dimensions goes back to his childhood and family background. The son, grandson and great-grandson of boilermakers in Reus, he knew at first hand the trade of the coppersmiths in his father Francesc's workshop, at Mas de la Calderera. Cutting, bending, forging, fretting and joining pieces of iron or copper were everyday activities for him: *From then on I imagined in three dimensions*, he used to say. Gaudí was able to imagine a cubic form from a two-dimensional plan, or create an empty space based on a metal object. Which is why his buildings are sculptural. He handles Catalan Gothic forms, Moorish shapes, the exuberance of Spanish Baroque, the Catalan tradition of iron working and the natural elements of the landscape and Mediterranean light, all with the same freedom, creating a language of great daring, magic feeling and vitality.

Yet Gaudí's most outstanding contribution to contemporary plastic arts was the application of the technique known as *trencadís*. Renewed appreciation of colour in architecture and use of the *trencadís*



Stained glass window with abstract coloured pattern - Casa Batlló, 1904-1906.



Casa Batlló

techniques are two of the most original features of his sculptural language: *Nature offers us no monochrome objects, completely uniform in colour, either in vegetation, or in geology, or topography, or the animal kingdom.*

Using *trencadís* Gaudí took ceramic pieces, large tiles broken during manufacture, fragments of china and stoneware dinner sets and other recycled material, and built them into abstract patterns. This can be seen, for example, in the group of chimneys for smoke and ventilation on the roof of the *Palau Güell*. With his *trencadís* and aesthetic appreciation of fragments, Gaudí was clearly a forerunner of *collage* and *objet-trouvé*, long before Picasso began to use them in 1912, and its practice extended to Dadaism and Surrealism.

Gaudí's tendency to abstract representation became more marked from 1906 onward, as a consequence of working with the painter, designer and architect Josep Maria Jujol. The *Casa Batlló's* polychrome ceramics (1904), the decorative elements of the famous bench in the *Parc Güell* (1910), the iron balconies of the *Casa*

Milà, commonly known as the *Pedrera* (1906-1912) and the inside painting of the building are examples of the collaboration of the two artists in Barcelona. During the same period Picasso was inventing the language of Cubism with the *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (1911) and *Les Femmes d'Alger (Version O)* (1912) and Mackintosh completed the *Glasgow School of Art*.

As in Mackintosh's case, Gaudí's architecture needs also to be interpreted from a nationalist perspective. At the end of the 19th century, Catalonia witnessed the cultural and bourgeois movement known as the *Renaixença* which sought to foster the rebirth of the cultural identity and reinstate the Catalan language. Gaudí himself, and Joan Güell, the father of Eusebi Güell, Gaudí's friend and patron, were outstanding figures. At the beginning of the century Barcelona was already one of the workshops of the *avant-garde*. There in the same city were to be found Gaudí, who had arrived in the autumn of 1868, and Picasso, who settled in 1895 at the age of 14. Once in Barcelona, the young Picasso paved the way for the counter movement to the work and spirituality of Gaudí. Years later, it was the praise heaped on Gaudí by Salvador Dalí which opened up the way to positive

appreciation of the architect by the Surrealist painters.

Gaudí embodied the artist-sculptor-architect. The last builder of cathedrals in the age of the birth of architectural functionalism announced by Mackintosh in Scotland. He ended his days alone, more and more a sculptor. His only occupation had become the building of the church of the *Sagrada Família*, the "cathedral of the poor" to which he devoted himself exclusively during the last forty years of his life (1882-1926). Weak and seriously ill with arthritis, the natural world continued to be the main source of his inspiration. When already an old man, he picked small wild flowers from the building site so that the sculptors would copy them on the spires of the cathedral apse as abstract forms. In 1923, three years before Antoni Gaudí died under the wheels of a tram in the middle of Barcelona, Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald settled in the French locality of Port Vendres, close to the border with Spain.

Throughout the story of modern art, the Mediterranean has been a constant attraction for artists: Matisse in Colliure, Miró in Monroig (Tarragona), and

Dalí at Port Lligat (Girona) are just some examples. Before settling in France, Mackintosh was already familiar with southern Europe. His Mediterranean experience was the first recognition of his work not as an architect but as a painter. In 1891 he had gone on a study tour in Italy, where he made a series of sketches, drawings and watercolours, on the subject of architecture. The Italian watercolours drew high praise from the painter James Guthrie, of the Glasgow Boys, who saw in Mackintosh a consummate artist.

When he was fifty-five, Mackintosh returned to the Mediterranean once again as a painter, seeking the fame that he could no longer find as an architect. The

watercolour landscapes he painted in France are a result of the Mediterranean sunlight, which exaggerates and highlights the lines delimiting the forms. In the Mediterranean, said Dalí, each hill, the contour of each stone could have been drawn by Leonardo da Vinci.

Although we have no direct information on Mackintosh's visit to Spain, among the pictures painted in France there are some Spanish themes: *Fetges*, in Mackintosh's opinion one of the best of his Mediterranean watercolours, *A Spanish Farm* or the French-Spanish frontier fortresses like *Le Fort Maillert*, *Le Fort Mauresque*. Visually, Mackintosh's French watercolours can be seen to be related to the painting of Dalí and De

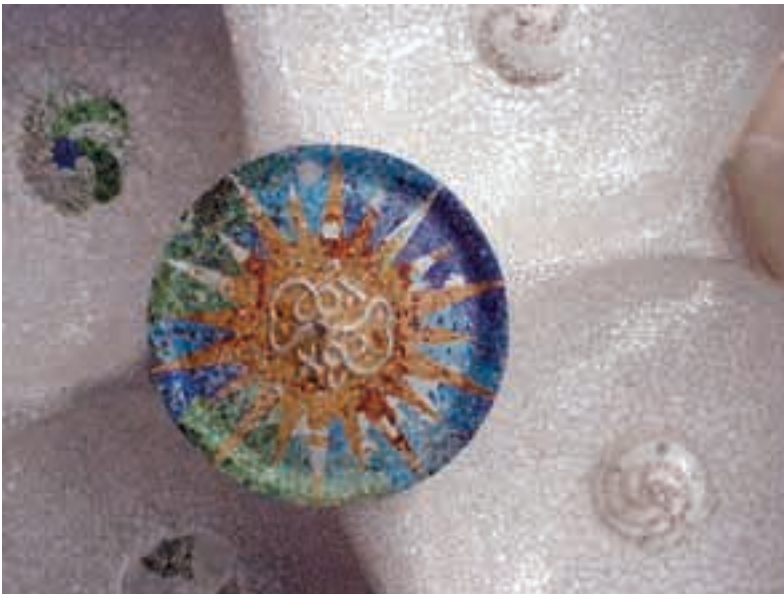


Fetges, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, c. 1926. Pencil and watercolour 46.4 x 45.7cm.

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Casa Milà, "La Pedrera".



Parc Güell

Chirico. They are not abstract watercolours in the literal sense of the word since the object can still be discerned in them. The precision of the drawing, the illusion of spatial depth (*The Rocks, Port Vendres, la Ville; La Rue du Soleil, Port Vendres*), the capturing of the smallest and most elemental detail, and above all, the Mediterranean conception of the light all lead to Mackintosh last paintings resembling supernatural landscapes by Dalí. As the latter very rightly said, Mackintosh was already a better painter than Cézanne.

Two years after Gaudí's death, on 10th December 1928 Mackintosh was to die in London from cancer of the tongue, forgotten in artistic circles. In 1933, the Mackintosh-Macdonald commemorative exhibition was held at the McLellan Galleries. That same year, Hitler came to power in Germany. Cruelty and fascism proliferated throughout Europe. In 1935, Picasso painted the Cubist manifesto *Gernika* against all wars. In 1936 Franco led the *coup d'état* against the Spanish republic. The Spanish Civil War broke out, heralding the Second World War. The crypt of the *Sagrada Família*, where Gaudí is buried, was profaned and his drawings and models were burnt. Gaudí and Mackintosh never met, yet both coincided in their daring and independence.

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